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Changing
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Implications for
Community Economic
Development

Sylvia Pellini MacPhee

Center for Community Economic Development
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PREFACE

In the United States, community-based economic development in low-income areas began most systematically in Black neighborhoods and rural areas in the late 1960s. The idea that a community group in a low-income, inner-city neighborhood or rural area -- with extremely limited resources -- would take up the recalcitrant problems of development economics seems almost incredible. Yet many groups took up and boldly carried forward comprehensive projects, so that today the federal government sponsors an innovative though small program of financial support for such groups. *

The success of Black communities in this respect can only be understood as a psychological and social phenomenon growing out of a sense of common identity, common goals, common problems, common effort. The example of that success suggested that other low-income community groups around the country might also use the same economic development tools, so Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Appalachians, Native Americans, and others have begun their own local economic development programs, generally using the community development corporation (CDC) as their basic tool.

The question arises, however, whether the potential for community-based economic development exists in still other low-income neighborhoods which had been less identified with the civil rights and antipoverty struggles from which the ethnic and political identity of the Blacks, for example, gained such strength. Could these ethnic groups build upon their neighborhood loyalties, their common problems, their common values for effective economic development projects? Some groups, such as the Chicanos or Native Americans, could, like the Blacks, draw upon the rising strength of their own civil rights movement, but there has been less evidence of the same sort of impetus in the so-called white ethnic neighborhoods. Yet as a part of the federal program support for community-based groups, in any low-income neighborhood, all ethnic groups must be considered.

*See Stewart E. Perry, "Federal Support for CDCs: Some of the History and Issues of Community Control," Review of Black Political Economy 3 (Spring 1973), 17-42; reprinted by the Center for Community Economic Development, Cambridge, Mass., 1973.

CCED has worked closely with one white ethnic CDC (and less intensively with other similar groups), with the aim of determining their special assets and constraints for community-based economic development. With the advice and consent of the East Boston CDC, an Italian-American neighborhood group, we stationed a staff member (John N. MacPhee) on site to work for more than a year as a participant and observer in their development program.* In addition, CCED commissioned a paper on the social and cultural characteristics of Italian-American communities and the relevance of these for locally engendered development programs. Sylvia Pellini MacPhee has prepared this paper as a background analysis for understanding the tasks of the East Boston CDC as well as for administrators of support programs (private or public) who may ask to what extent an Italian-American community can use its own social resources for economic development. This paper, together with others in preparation by John MacPhee, who continues to work closely with EBCDC, should provide a basic insight into the energy and potential of an organized Italian-American community and its ambitious program to guide its own development and destiny.

Stewart E. Perry
Executive Director, CCED

*The first report from this study, "Local Government and Community Autonomy in East Boston," was published by the Center for Community Economic Development in 1973.

Changing Perspectives of Italian-Americans

In recent years the residents of Italian-American neighborhoods in metropolitan areas have begun to voice their frustrations and make demands upon the decision-makers whose decrees influence their communities and individual lives. In turn, the decision-makers and program designers must respond to these increased demands. If they do so on the assumption that certain characteristics are Italian, or ethnic, in nature, then they must see them as integral, somewhat unchanging elements of that community, which they must work around, rather than deal with directly. If instead they understand that these attitudes are remnants of a peasant culture, or a culture of poverty, and therefore socioeconomic and political in nature, then they must be viewed as subject to change, not integral, and capable of being dealt with directly.* The purpose of this paper is to persuade the reader that the latter is in fact the more accurate view.

Do the so-called "Little Italies" manifest ethnic characteristics exclusively, or even predominantly? Or are these insulated neighborhoods still linked more generally to their Old World origins in the manifestation of predominantly peasant characteristics? (The word "peasant" has negative and condescending connotations in our sophisticated, technological world. It helps to remember then that even today the majority of mankind are peasants. Anthropologists disagree on a precise definition of peasantry; the following has been selected for its simplicity and clarity: "The peasantry consists of small agricultural producers who, with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their families, produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfillment of obligations to the holders of political and economic power.")¹

Whether certain characteristics are specifically ethnic or generally

*There is anthropological literature that makes a case for the existence of a "peasant" culture, in which "peasantness" is a dominant common factor for underdeveloped agrarian communities (see Notes 1 and 4). There is literature on "the culture of poverty," in which poverty plays the same role (see Note 3); however, peasant culture cannot be totally explained by the culture of poverty.

peasant in their nature is not merely an academic question. Suppose an official from a private foundation or governmental agency who has the responsibility for allocating funds for the stabilization and revitalization of inner-city neighborhoods is considering an Italian-American neighborhood and begins to read the most widely recognized sociological literature concerning urban Italian-Americans.² What this person would learn from these sources is that Italian-Americans do not have a strong sense of common identity with one another in their neighborhoods; that they have not worked cooperatively to solve community problems; that they have not made use of, but rather avoided, outside resources; and that, in addition, they do not have strong leadership from within. Although these authors make reference to the fact that Italian immigrants settling in these neighborhoods left a rural life of poverty in southern Italy, they nonetheless tend to leave the reader with the general impression that the characteristics described are ethnic (Italian) rather than socioeconomic and political in nature. For instance, although Gans concedes that sociologists still do not know which characteristics are ethnic and which are class, he nevertheless asserts that the characteristics he describes are "almost, but not entirely, representative of the mainstream of second-generation Italian life in America," thereby implicitly reaffirming ethnicity as the dominant factor. Since our hypothetical official wants particularly to select a neighborhood that appears to have the necessary ingredients for success, the fact that the most often quoted sociological literature regarding Italian-Americans does not project a very promising picture becomes very pertinent indeed.

If, instead, our official had explored the literature of anthropologists, he would have learned that the residents of these urban neighborhoods, although not suffering the dire poverty that they or their forebears had experienced as peasants in southern Italy, still retain and transmit many of the beliefs and behavioral traits developed to survive under such a system. He would have seen, further, that these are not uniquely Italian characteristics, but can be found in other peasant cultures in which the inhabitants have had little or no control over their economic lives.³

Such beliefs -- and the behavior resulting therefrom -- are based

primarily on "the image of limited good," the peasant world-view in which prized aspects of life (land, wealth, health, friendship, manliness, respect, status, power, and so forth) are finite, in short supply, and cannot be increased.⁴ Consequently, individuals or families can improve their position only at the expense of others and, conversely, an improvement in someone else's position with respect to any "good" is viewed as a threat to the entire community. In actuality, peasant economics are not very productive; in terms of the peasant's economic world, his view is realistic rather than fatalistic. In most peasant villages, there is only a limited amount of wealth produced and extra effort does not make an appreciable difference. In an Italian-American neighborhood still operating on these assumptions, the success of a program is in part dependent on showing that the economic pie is not limited, that it can be expanded, and that therefore one will not lose out by engaging in cooperative efforts, but rather that the reverse is true. In addition, if the suspicion and skepticism intertwined in many of their beliefs are to be altered, the residents must be offered the opportunity to have some measure of control over their own lives.

Residents of Italian-American neighborhoods have been described as "person-oriented," which according to Gans means that "[they] are not interested in careers, but in jobs that pay the most money for the least amount of physical discomfort, because they want to make money and save their energy for person-oriented behavior within the peer group. Similarly, they do not strive to live up to moral or ideological principles, but want to act in a way that earns no opprobrium from the group, and that fits group beliefs."⁵ Such an orientation is in contrast to the "object orientation" of the middle class, which is defined as "striving toward the achievement of an 'object.' This may be a moral object, for example, a principle; an ideological object, such as 'understanding'; a material object, such as level of income; a cultural object, such as a style of life; or a social object, such as a career or a status position. Although people strive after a variety of objects, they tend to verbalize ideological and moral ones more than the material and social ones."⁶

Gans's concept of person- versus object-oriented people, in my

opinion, is limited by his own object-oriented view. While it may promote the feeling in his readers -- among them planners and decision-makers -- that they should recognize Italian-American communities as "communities" and respond sensitively to their needs, it also leaves them with the notion that Italian-American communities need to be "planned for" since they are seemingly unable to plan for themselves. Regardless of their orientation; Italian neighborhoods have been generally healthy social systems that have been vital to urban stability. They have continued to survive because they have served important purposes for various groups: a temporary resting place for those who merely wanted and needed time to learn the rules of our society before moving on; a safe harbor for those who either chose to maintain an Italian identity or felt rejected by the dominant American society; a home to Italian-Americans who would not or could not decide between attachment to parents and acceptance in American society; and -- hardly least -- these neighborhoods have provided large apartments, low rentals, and the opportunity to maintain a particular life-style without interference.

Nonetheless, it is true that being person-oriented does not equip one to combat object-oriented planners who have destroyed or threaten to destroy these communities through urban renewal, highway construction, and similar measures. If the neighborhoods are to remain viable, they must develop the clout to inform "decision-makers" (both government and private enterprise) that they know what is in their own best interest. Such community power is based on precisely those traits already mentioned and presumably limited in Italian-American communities: a sense of common identity among the residents of the community; an ability to work cooperatively to deal with common problems; an ability to make use of resources outside the community; and leadership from within the community. While Italian-American communities have made progress in all these respects, it has thus far been a slow, difficult process. This, I submit, is not explained by seeing these communities as locked into rigid ethnic postures, but is attributable to the fact that these essential qualities had no place in the peasant culture of southern Italy from which the majority of immigrants came.

A Demographic Sketch

There are approximately fifteen million people in the United States who consider themselves Italian-Americans, and the majority share a peasant heritage in the unyielding soil of southern Italy.* They are here because their ancestors came in search -- not of political freedom but, rather, freedom from poverty. They are still new to this country, since four-fifths of the immigrants came in the twentieth century, particularly during the years 1901 to 1914. The United States Census Bureau classified 96 percent of them as unskilled laborers; in actuality, they had been peasants -- small landowners, tenant farmers, and day laborers. For many, the dream in coming to America was not to become "Americans," but to earn sufficient money to return to their village with the money to change their lowly peasant status to that of "prestigious" landowner, and in so doing, alter their own self-image. Many indeed did return but still more remained, calling their families to join them. Today, 70 percent of first- and second-generation Italian-Americans live in a megalopolis that stretches -- for them -- from Boston to Norfolk. They are now urban rather than rural dwellers and share a working-class rather than peasant-class status; they have not been assimilated into the melting pot, and their view of the world is still influenced by their peasant origins.⁷

What it means to be a peasant in southern Italy has been vividly described by Carlo Levi in Christ Stopped at Eboli. "We're not Christians, we're not human beings; we're not thought of as men but simply as beasts, beasts of burden, or even less than beasts, mere creatures of the wild. They at least live for better or for worse, like angels or demons, in a world of their own, while we have to submit to the world of Christians, beyond the horizon, to carry its weight and to stand comparison with it. . . . Christ never came this far, nor did time, nor the individual soul, nor hope, nor the relation of cause to effect, nor reason, nor history."⁸ The Italian peasant was either neglected or ridiculed and humiliated in the society in which he lived; he brought his badly scarred self-image with him to America.

*Throughout the paper, reference to southern Italy includes Sicily as well.

It was a carryover of this feeling that prompted Gans to write that the Italian-Americans of the West End operated "without a self-image." He felt that this was due in part to their child-rearing practices. "The West Ender cannot conceive the self that he gives" and therefore finds "difficulty in giving of himself consciously to his children."⁹ This explanation does not go far enough. The West Enders' negative self-image, or lack of it, is not an Italian phenomenon, but, rather, is rooted in the peasant experience of southern Italy.

The Sense of Common Identity

The code in Italian-American neighborhoods has always been "mind your own business," which certainly implies not taking to the streets. On 28 September 1968, however, some East Bostonians were sufficiently angered and united to do just that. Community housewives physically blocked a local street to prevent its use by dump and fuel trucks in and out of Logan International Airport. The Massachusetts Port Authority, operator of the airport, responded by using an alternate route on its own property. It was a small beginning, but an important one nonetheless, because it served to develop street leaders who became involved in other community issues, which in turn helped to foster a sense of common identity in the wider community.¹⁰

Such unity of spirit is a recent phenomenon; historically Italian-Americans have not identified to any significant degree with the general Italian-American population living within the same neighborhood, nor have they felt attached to the neighborhood as a physical entity. As the literature points out, theirs was a much more limited community. Gans, in the Urban Villagers, discussed his finding that the residents of the West End of Boston did not conceive of the West End as a single neighborhood, but rather as many subareas. In keeping with this, politicians made a somewhat different speech on each street, filled with promises of what they would do for that particular street if elected. When the Boston Planning Board received the necessary government approvals for its proposed redevelopment of the West End, which involved the demolition of the neighborhood, Gans found that the residents were unable to unite to defend their neighborhood. As a result, today

the West End is no longer an "ethnic" neighborhood; its large family units were demolished and replaced by high-rent housing.

The North End of Boston, described by Whyte in Street Corner Society, also consisted of many communities within a community. At that time (the 1940s), the North End could be broken down into sections according to the town of origin of the immigrants. This is no longer true, but the status attached to which province you or your relatives came from still lingers in these neighborhoods.

Again in reference to Boston's North End, Walter Firey has stated: "Contrary to some beliefs, the Italians who lived there had no apparent attachment to the neighborhood as a physical entity. Indeed, for some, the area per se was ... plainly distasteful ... nevertheless their residence in it was instrumental to adherence to certain cherished values...."¹¹ One of these cherished values is the emotional bond between family members as well as peer group members. These bonds make it difficult for an individual to leave the community for fear that others will view his action as a rejection of them and for fear that he will be rejected.

Italians think of other Italians as being "our own kind"; however, there is also the feeling that some Italians are "more our own kind" than others. The distinctions Italians make among themselves is a counterforce in the development of a common identity within the neighborhood. There are several forms these distinctions may take:

Region of Origin -- There is a certain inherent prestige or lack of it based simply on where in Italy your family originated. On the top of the social ladder is the northern Italian, next the central, then the southern mainlander, and, lastly, the Sicilian. Since the economic wealth of Italy is concentrated primarily in the north, its residents had greater opportunities for jobs, as well as greater opportunities and incentives for educational development. The northern Italian immigrated to America before the great influx of southerners; he arrived while this country was still developing its frontiers and with specialized skills that were needed. Consequently, the northerner has a tendency to throw his shoulders back and make clear to those around him that it is he who typifies the true Italian heritage rather than his southern countrymen. His countrymen, on the other hand, view him (the northerner) as conde-

scending and as having historically exploited their poverty. They view the northerners' mobility as a product of his greed and selfishness, which is the same impression they have of most middle-class Americans.

Italian Versus Italian-American -- Although it appears that the immigrant is immediately absorbed into the community, there is a difference, which the immigrant soon senses. A few years in America have changed the earlier arrivals, have added American phrases to their talk; they have developed a condescending attitude toward the newcomers. The newcomer feels a gap not only between himself and the native-born, but between himself and his more settled contemporaries.¹² The individual who has just stepped off the boat, as well as anyone who speaks with an accent, is called a "greaser."¹³ Gans found this attitude reflected in the feeling that the "dirty jobs" should go to recent immigrants as well as to Blacks and Puerto Ricans. This behavior becomes more understandable when one realizes that in southern Italy the "better" classes prove that they are "better" by disdaining manual labor, since that is the mark of the peasant. Perhaps the immigrants who have been settled longer, and their children, are acting like old world gentry in greeting the new peasant immigrants to this country to remind them that their own status is now quite different.

Generation Gaps -- Family strength has weakened in America; goals have become more oriented toward what is best for the individual rather than what is best for the family. American schools and street life focus on the individual, further separating the generations. Although loved and cared for in the family units, the elderly are not a respected part of the community in the sense that they are not turned to for their views. Gans found that Italians relate horizontally, in peer groups that pull individuals together who are roughly of the same age, socioeconomic level, and cultural background, and who are compatible. Adolescents relate on one level; adults on another; the elderly on still another.

Communication Between the Sexes -- Italians are reared with the belief (unspoken usually) that communication between man and woman must inevitably evolve into a sexual relationship. As a result, meaningful dialogue on general topics takes place usually only between members of the same sex, since crossing the sexual barrier produces tension.

In southern Italy, since the belief is that no amount of willpower can resist the force of nature (love), custom intervenes as a protection requiring that women talk to men only in the presence of others.

The Educated and Uneducated -- Italian-Americans are ambivalent toward education. They want their children sufficiently educated to get a "good, clean job," to earn enough money to provide for their family, and to enjoy their friends. On the other hand, they do not want their children to become so well educated that they look down on their family. Historically, the southern Italian in his native country was not permitted to go to school, not only because he was needed at home to work but also because only the northern and central Italians as well as the southern "gentlemen" used school to prepare for professions and specific skills. He (the southern peasant) was not welcomed. It may be that he carried the belief to this country that he and his children did not belong in an educational setting, as they did not in Italy; there is also the feeling that interest in education is not very masculine. The child who finds challenge in educational achievement oftentimes does not find support for his efforts in his family and risks the ridicule of his peer group. If he goes beyond high school to college, he must tread a thin line if he is to continue to be accepted by the community in which he was reared. He must be careful not to give the impression that he considers himself superior to his childhood friends; he must also maintain the life-style of entertaining his friends in his home and in general convey the image of still being "one of them." If he becomes career oriented and seeks wider horizons, he will be viewed as someone who is "out for himself," who does not remember who his friends are. In other words, he must maintain Italian working-class values while having the ability and opportunity to become middle class.

In an Italian-American community there is a common identity in the sense that most residents are participants in an Italian working-class life-style; on the other hand, there are many divisive qualities in this life-style. A feeling of oneness among Italian-Americans has been understandably slow in developing when one considers the limited world from which the immigrant came. It can best be summed up in the word campanilismo, which refers to the villagers' reluctance to extend social,

cultural, and economic contacts beyond points from which the parish or village bell could be heard.¹⁴ Even today in many Italian towns the term forestiero (stranger) is used to refer to a person from the next village. In a sense he is a stranger, since he often has a different dialect, different customs, cookery, dress, and so on. In addition, in southern Italy the family, not the individual, is the unit of society. In fact, loyalty to the family is so intense that its honor must be protected before that of the community or nation. This need to protect the family from insult in turn produces interfamily antagonisms, which make it difficult for a consciousness of kind to exist.¹⁵

This lack of common identity, which sociologists such as Gans and Moynihan point to in Italian-American communities, is not specifically an Italian phenomenon. Karl Marx, in writing of the peasantry in France, also mentioned the lack of common identity among them. Each individual peasant family was almost self-sufficient and their mode of production isolated them rather than bringing them together. "In so far as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organization among them, they do not form a class."¹⁶ Kazimierz Dobrowolski, in an essay on peasant culture in southern Poland, also spoke of the peasant's world as limited to his village community and noted that inhabitants of neighboring villages were always looked upon as strangers; that is, they were treated in an antagonistic fashion.¹⁷

An interesting indication that there is a growing feeling of a consciousness of kind in Italian-American communities can be seen in the fact that the word paesano to most Italian-Americans today means fellow countryman rather than fellow townsman, which is its literal translation.

The Ability to Work Cooperatively

Since 1968 in the Italian-American community of East Boston, people have been joining together to protect their community from the continued expansion of Logan International Airport. Their protests succeeded in preventing the construction of a planned runway and won political support on all levels for their cause. Such action among Italian-

Americans demonstrates a growing willingness to work together to deal with common problems.

This, however, has been a recent phenomenon, for historically Italian-Americans in general have not seen the need for community participation and cooperation. Problems are solved by the individual, the family, or the peer group, or by going to the politician to ask a favor. If these methods fail, then, as they see it, the problem can not be solved. The literature claims that Italians are fatalists. They believe that God is in charge of the sacred portion of the universe, while the secular world is controlled by the powers-that-be in the outside world. Certain human problems, such as alcoholism, and even mental illness, are considered problems of the individual and are due to a lack of self-control or weakness in character; they have not been viewed as community problems about which something should be done.

Another reason why Italian-Americans have not come together to resolve community problems is the strong belief that each person should mind his own business and that that "business" is confined primarily to his own immediate family and other relatives. Advancement must be oriented toward advancing one's family, not the community at large. Since the Italian-American will not allow anyone to interfere with his family's business, he in turn does not believe that he should interfere with the affairs of others. He will ignore illegal activities or any objectionable behavior as long as it does not interfere with his world. Any private citizen involved in working toward resolving public problems who claims he has no ulterior motive will not be believed, because there is the general feeling that nobody does anything if there is not some private gain involved. Besides, Italian-Americans believe it should be the politician who resolves community problems -- that is why he is paid. Moynihan points out, in Beyond the Melting Pot, that Italian-Americans as a group move slowly and are conservative in philosophy and habits; as a result, mobility has to be an individual experience, which can be painful, in contrast to mobility for Jews, which is a group-supported phenomenon.

The lack of cooperative activity on the part of Italian-Americans has its roots in the fact that in southern Italy the peasant's individuality is

controlled and articulated by the family group. His decisions must be in accord with and limited to what is beneficial to the family as a whole.¹⁸ In addition, the fact that the immigrants brought with them a suspicion and mistrust of those who did not share the same dialect and customs made collective approaches to a problem extremely difficult.

The beliefs that Gans, Moynihan, and Whyte found in Italian-American communities are actually a carryover from the southern Italian village, for there, too, the peasants did not see their problems as community problems but rather as problems to be resolved by the family. Since so many were poor, poverty itself was not viewed as a disgrace; dependence upon public charity was the disgrace, for it meant that you did not even have enough control over your own life to care for yourself and your dependents. The disabilities of old age, retardation, or mental illness became the responsibility of the family and the family achieved a degree of prestige in caring for their own (la pieta -- a noble disposition of the soul toward kindness and mercy); institutionalization of one of their own brought a stigma on the family as a whole.¹⁹ Another belief that inhibited attempts to search for a cooperative solution to problems was described by Banfield in The Moral Basis of a Backward Society. This was the conviction that a person's welfare depends crucially upon conditions beyond human control -- upon luck or the caprice of a saint -- and that one can at best only improve upon good fortune.²⁰

Banfield also pointed out that in southern Italy, since the focus of the community was the family, no one would work to further the interest of the group or community except when it was to the private, material advantage of the family to do so. The hope of material gain in the short run was the only motive for concern with public affairs, and only officials concerned themselves with public affairs since only they were paid to do so. If a private citizen took a serious interest in a public problem it would be regarded as abnormal and even improper because he was not minding his own business. In fact, the claim of any person or institution to be inspired by zeal for public rather than private advantage would be regarded as fraud. As a result, Banfield viewed the southern Italians as "amoral familists," which is the view that Gans accepts and uses in

describing the Italian-Americans of the West End of Boston. Banfield found that the amoral familist would not help the community without first knowing what benefits such action would mean for him and his family. In fact, he would vote against measures that would help the community without helping him because, even though his position would be unchanged in absolute terms, he would consider himself worse off if his neighbors' position changed for the better. (In other words, even though Banfield did not see it as such, he was describing the concept of "the image of limited good" which the anthropologist George Foster found operating in the peasant community he studied in Mexico.) In keeping with this, measures that were of decided general benefit would provoke a protest vote from those who felt that they had not shared in them or had not shared in them sufficiently. Any advantage that may be given to another is necessarily at the expense of one's own family; therefore all those who stand outside of the small circle of the family are at least potential competitors and also potential enemies. Such a view breeds suspicion and cynicism and is evidenced in the code that is obeyed in all decisions; that is, do not allow anyone to make a fool of you (non farsi far fesso). To help someone without benefiting yourself is to allow yourself to be used.

F. G. Friedmann in his article "The World of La Miseria" points out that working together for some common benefit requires some initial sacrifice that one has to be able to afford. "In a more general sense, the social contract ultimately is based upon my ability and willingness to give up something I possess in order to receive some other good. This refers not only to the material but to the more properly human realm as well; unless I possess a certain freedom of action (a measure of personal security) I am unable to surrender part of this freedom in order that what is left of it may be more solidly secured."²¹ For this reason, the only form of social cooperation practiced by the peasants is "la omerta." Literally translated it means solidarity; it requires only silence and the individual need not relinquish anything. The code demands that all private differences should be settled privately and no information should be given to the authorities.

Again, there is ample documentation to show that this lack of coop-

erative activity on the part of Italian peasants is not a peculiarly Italian phenomenon. For example, Gerrit Huizer has pointed out that cooperation within the community was the exception rather than the rule among the Indian peasants he studied in Peru.²² And certainly the "amoralism" described by Banfield in southern Italy reads very much the same as the "amoralism" described by F. G. Bailey in his work on the peasants of Orissa in India. Bailey writes at one point: "One justifies cheating government agencies by saying that the officials concerned are cheating you. This perception is often so firm that even behavior which is patently not exploitative, but benevolent, is interpreted as a hypocritical cover for some as yet undisclosed interest; by definition all horses are Trojan."²³ Such a passage could have passed easily for one of Banfield's statements about the peasants he studied in southern Italy or for one of Gans's observations about the Italian-Americans he studied in the West End.

The Ability to Make Use of Outside Resources

The 2 March 1972 issue of the East Boston Times announced the formation of a new organization, known as "Save East Boston," which was "designed to stop the outside influence that is attempting to take full control of East Boston." An earlier (2 February 1972) issue had editorialized: "I'm sick and tired of outsiders presenting East Boston's problems to outsiders." Sentiments similar to the above are often heard in Italian-American communities, for they are consistent with the desire for a life-style without interference. Until recently, Italian-American communities have not made use of outside resources, since to do so runs counter to deep-rooted peasant traditions. Nonetheless the Italian-American community of East Boston, along with other ethnic groups throughout the country, is slowly stepping out of these traditions. East Boston did so when it sought and received "outside" support from individuals and organizations in its efforts to contain airport expansion. Ethnic communities today realize that they can no longer remain insulated; indeed if they are to continue to exist, they must make use of outside resources.

This new awareness in Italian-American communities is too recent a phenomenon to have been reflected in the literature of the 1960s. Gans

found in his study of the West End that the laws, the police, and the government were conceived as agencies that existed to exploit West Enders and therefore were viewed with considerable hostility. They did not relate to these agencies because they felt that that was the function of the politician who served as an intermediary. Since Italian-Americans expected to be exploited in their contact with the outside world, they were ready to exploit it in return. This belief coincides with the tendency to expect the worst from everyone outside the family and peer group. According to Gans, most Italian-Americans participate only minimally in that outside world, partly because they lack a self-image and therefore are uncomfortable in unfamiliar surroundings. They succeed in protecting themselves from it by suspicion and rejection, as well as by the support they get from the peer-group society. Although Gans believed that suspicion of government and politics can be found in all social strata, he felt that feelings on these subjects were most intense and less open to change in Italian-American communities.

This lack of involvement with the outside world on the part of Italian-Americans in America can be traced to the lack of involvement on the part of their parents or grandparents in southern Italy. There, their horizon was limited to their own village; as has been stated previously, all outsiders were seen as foreigners. In addition, the centuries of oppression experienced at the hands of the state left the peasant with a strong distrust of the state and all authority. In The Italians, Luigi Barzini pointed out that many Italians still obey a double standard; one code valid within the family circle with relatives and close associates and another regulating life outside.

The refusal to deal with "outside" authorities is exemplified in southern Italy's popular tradition of no cooperation with the government, based on the moral code of la omerta. It is a reflection of the peasants' suspicion of strangers and of authority.

Perhaps the best understanding can be provided by Carlo Levi writing of the peasant experience of the 1940s. "What had the peasants to do with Power, Government and the State? The State, whatever form it might take, meant 'the fellows in Rome.' 'Everyone knows,' they said, 'that the fellows in Rome don't want us to live like human beings.

There are hailstorms, landslides, droughts, malaria and ... the State. These are inescapable evils; such there always have been and there always will be. They make us kill off our goats, they carry away our furniture, and now they're going to send us to the wars. Such is life.' To the peasants the State is more distant than heaven and far more of a scourge, because it is always against them. Its political tags and platforms and, indeed, the whole structure of it do not matter. The peasants do not understand them because they are couched in a different language from their own, and there is no reason why they should ever care to understand them. Their only defense against the State and the propaganda of the State is resignation²⁴ Remnants of these attitudes remain in Italian-American communities to this day, echoes from the past, but peasant, rather than ethnic, in their origin.

Leadership from Within the Italian-American Community

Italian-American communities have been turning to their young well-educated residents to represent them in recent years. They are elected not merely to express their anger and frustration at the outside world but to express the community's views.

Historically the behavior of Italian-American community leaders, particularly politicians, often appeared irrational to outsiders. The West Enders expected their leaders to arouse them and to express for them their own anger at the outside world. "If a politician fails to act in this fashion, he is suspected of having sold out; consequently, he often functions in ways that the outside world interprets as rabble-rousing, even though his inflammatory speeches are not likely to produce much citizen action."²⁵ In the past only a highly charismatic leader seemed to be able to attract followers and retain their loyalty for any length of time. In fact Whyte's description of the "ideal leader" as seen by the North End community seems to describe a benevolent dictator. He writes that the leader is the focal point for the organization of his group; when he is absent, the group subdivides into smaller groups and no common activity occurs. When the leader arrives, the small factions unite into one large group; the conversation is directed to the group as a whole and unified action frequently follows. A meeting

does not begin until the leader arrives, and when he is present he is expected to make their decisions for them; he is the one that is expected to act when a situation requires action. He is expected to be more resourceful and independent in his judgment than the others in the group. While his followers are undecided about a course of action or the character of a newcomer, the leader makes up his mind. If a leader is to remain a leader, he must be careful to be fair-minded and not bear a grudge against any man in the group. The leader mobilizes the group by dealing with his lieutenants, and he is very careful not to place himself under obligations to those with low status in the group; when a group splits it is usually because of conflict between the leader and one of his lieutenants rather than a shake-up from the bottom.

As a rule, leadership has been short-lived in Italian-American communities. There is a carryover of the Old World edict, "you stay out of my hair and I'll stay out of yours," which is inherent in the concept of "amoral familism." With this philosophy, the leader is open to the criticism that he is interfering, and his followers soon wonder what he (the leader) has to gain. Only religious figures can escape such suspicion, but they do so only if they concern themselves solely with religious activities. Once they step over that line, they too may be suspected of having worldly motives.

It is especially dangerous for a religious leader to enter politics because Italian-Americans feel that politics is intrinsically and inevitably corrupt, and few politicians, in their view, can resist the temptation. There appear to be contradictions in their view of the priesthood. They may accept priests as leaders, but there is the question of whether they respect them as men. Traditionally, southern Italians have been anticlerical, because the church in Italy sided with the large landowners against the peasants. In America, Italians identify with the religion but not the church. (The Church is seen as Irish.)

The male attitude toward the church is based in large part on lack of respect for the priesthood. Priests are expected to be morally superhuman, yet they are viewed with suspicion because they are believed to be not human enough, choosing a celibate life. To repeat, when the priest becomes involved in secular concerns, his legitimate authority

ends, and he is either openly chastised by the parishioners or his transgression may be reported to the pastor.²⁶ It is true that a priest might, at least for a time, provide some leadership on fully secular issues, but at a cost of considerable criticism. For instance, a priest in East Boston was asked by a community newspaper to give up his elected state office so that a family man could have the income.

The problems of leadership within Italian-American communities stem from the problems of leadership found in southern Italy. The peasants who worked their own fields often lived off advance payments for their crops, but, when the harvest arrived, they rarely were able to pay back what they had borrowed. They seldom produced enough to feed their families and pay their taxes. They were powerless except within the family circle. Problems were seen as family problems; in such a society there can be no stable leader-follower relationship. In The Italians Barzini points out that in the south of Italy the law and the state have feeble powers and, as a result, the Italian peasant knows he can not rely on leaders but rather he must learn to defend himself. He goes on to say that public officials are always suspected of taking bribes and therefore do not usually last too long.

The lack of leadership is a common theme in the literature concerning peasant culture. In writing about the French peasantry of the 1850s, Marx stated: "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above."²⁷ The same statement could have been written by Banfield of the southern Italian peasant of the 1950s, by Whyte of the Italian-Americans in the North End of the 1940s, or by Gans of the West End of the 1950s and 1960s. The tide is changing, however, with the development of the new ethnic awareness, and the same statement will not apply in the decade of the seventies.²⁸

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This paper has attempted to demonstrate that certain characteristics important to community organization and development have been

gradually evolving in Italian-American communities. It has been a slow process not because they are Italian-American, but because they are people who are still tied to their peasant roots. To break the pattern of anarchy and indifference in the peasantry of southern Italy, anthropologists have recommended that the Italian government stop doing what it believes is "right" for them and allow them to determine what is in their own best interest and then act upon it. The solution is the same for Italian-American communities; that is, they need sufficient autonomy to determine and implement what is in their own best interest rather than merely accept what government and "outside" planners and developers have decided. Only in this way can the suspicion and skepticism that form the basis of many of their beliefs be dissipated, for only then will they no longer be needed.



NOTES

1. Teodor Shanin, "Peasantry as a Political Factor," in Teodor Shanin, editor, Peasants and Peasant Societies (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971), p. 240.

2. William Whyte, Street Corner Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943); Herbert J. Gans, The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans (New York: The Free Press, 1962); and Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan, Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City (Cambridge: The M. I. T. Press, 1963).

3. Oscar Lewis, Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture of Poverty (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

4. George M. Foster, "Peasant Society and the Image of Limited Good," in Jack M. Potter, Uray N. Diaz, George M. Foster, editors, Peasant Society, A Reader (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967), p. 300.

5. Gans, Urban Villagers, p. 93.

6. Ibid., p. 90.

7. Demographic information is drawn from the following sources: Joseph Lopreato, Italian-Americans (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 12, 18, and 179; and Lawrence Pisani, The Italian in America (New York: Exposition Press, 1957), p. 143.

8. Carlo Levi, Christ Stopped at Eboli (New York: The Noonday Press, 1947), pp. 3-4.

9. Gans, Urban Villagers, p. 99.

10. For a broader discussion of the growing awareness occurring in this particular Italian-American neighborhood, see "Local Government and Community Autonomy in East Boston," by John MacPhee (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Community Economic Development, 1973).

11. As quoted by Lopreato, Italian-Americans, p. 52.

12. Pisani, The Italian in America, p. 61.

13. Whyte, Street Corner Society, pp. xviii and 149.

14. For more on "campanilismo" see: Phyllis H. Williams, South Italian Folkways in Europe and America (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), p. 75. Also, Enrico Sartorio, Social and Religious Life of Italians in America (Mass.: The Christopher Publishing House, 1918), p. 38. Joseph Lopreato also discusses it in Italian-Americans.

15. For a fuller discussion of the family in southern Italy see Luigi Barzini, The Italians (New York: Bantam Books, 1964), pp. 198-223 and Edward C. Banfield, The Moral Basis of a Backward Society (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1958), sections on amoral familism.

16. Karl Marx, "Peasantry as a Class," in Shanin, Peasants, p. 231.

17. Kazimierz Dobrowolski, "Peasant Traditional Culture," in Shanin, Peasants, pp. 227-298.

18. Lopreato, Italian-Americans, pp. 59-60.

19. More on "la pieta" can be found in Williams, South Italian Folkways, p. 189. She also describes how "la pieta" breaks down in America.

20. Banfield's evaluation here agrees with that of Luigi Barzini in The Italians: that is, the peasant believes that he has no control over his misfortune. Phyllis Williams, in South Italian Folkways, p. 142, states just the contrary; that is, "Rather did they think in terms of specific human causation and attributed mishaps to the influence of an ever-present menace, the power of envy. This force becomes effective through the occhio cattivo (evil eye) and, to a less extent, through witches." Actually, there is no contradiction; both attitudes operated side by side.

21. In Potter, Diaz, and Foster, Peasant Society, p. 329.

22. Gerrit Huizer, "Community Development, Land Reform, and Political Participation," in Shanin, Peasants, p. 393.

23. F. G. Bailey, "The Peasant View of the Bad Life," in Shanin, Peasants, p. 302.

24. Levi, Christ Stopped at Eboli, pp. 76-77.

25. Gans, Urban Villagers, p. 110.

26. Ibid., pp. 110-115.

27. Marx, "Peasantry as a Class," p. 231.

28. Michael Novak, The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1971).

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The Center for Community Economic Development (CCED) is an independent research group located at 1878 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02140. Its primary function is to conduct public policy research by examining the ongoing problems of community development corporations (CDCs) and of other community-based economic organizations. A CDC is a corporation based in one geographic area and controlled democratically by the residents. It can (and does) own stores, housing, factories, and so forth on behalf of the community. It usually attempts simultaneously to develop social services. When profits are made, many CDCs attempt to shift at least part of these directly into a variety of neighborhood-building activities.

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